

Enhancing listening skills: issues and possible solutions

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to investigate the extent to which listening skills development is realized in Italian language classes in Albanian pre-university education as one of the basic skills naturally interconnected comprehension and production. The research at hand is the first of this nature conducted in Albanian schools. The issues encountered in the development of this skill have been verified in our teaching experience; It has been noticed that students enrolled in the first-year encounter difficulties related to listening skills. Therefore, this study was considered as important and the relevant questionnaires were compiled. Following the collection of information, its analysis, and interpretation, possible suggestions were sought considering the encountered issues. The study revealed that this skill is underutilized or not utilized properly, as it is often not considered as a required skill. Students are limited to reading or listening skills only, delivered either by the teachers in class or through the few exercises provided by the foreign language book, without employing various strategies or techniques for its development and without using relevant authentic materials.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, students of the first year are submitted to acceptance exams in order to verify their language proficiency levels. It has been observed that a considerable number of students encounter many difficulties, both in basic skills as well as in integrated skills carried on from their previous education. Regarding the development of these skills and related issues, the research focused on verifying them in relation to the listening skills as a basic one. Since listening is closely related to both comprehension, oral and written production, we believe it should be developed at the same level as well as in parallel with other language skills.

This study aims to: i) identify the issues related to the development of listening skills in foreign languages in Albanian pre-university education; ii) verify the listening skills development extent in foreign language classrooms; students' perception of this skill's progress during foreign language instruction; iii) examination of impact of suitable and diverse techniques as well as authentic materials employed by teachers, during pre-listening, listening, and post-listening activities.

Listening is a natural process involving data processing to be interpreted in order to provide a relevant understanding [1]. Listening should be positioned first of the four basic skills in teaching and learning a foreign language, since it is automatically related to understanding following with language reproduction in speaking and writing. It is a rather complex process which requires a multilateral attachment

of the student [2], playing a paramount importance role in learning a foreign language since through listening, the learner understands, distinguishes, and lays the foundations for the development of other foreign language skills [3].

Listening is the first skill that every human acquires already in the early unconscious learning stages [4]. Studies showed that hearing is the most important skill for language learning as it is the most commonly used in ordinary daily life [5]. Despite the importance this ability bears, it is among the most forgotten skills taken into consideration by the teachers in foreign language classes [6], [7].

In earlier studies, listening was considered a passive skill that would be developed through speaking and reading [8], [9] whilst hearing was based solely on the teacher's speech [10]. Studies note that listening being considered a passive skill in learning foreign languages is still coming second to speech production [11] emphasizing the development of target language articulation. It was only in the early 1970s that studies related to gaining the necessary listening skills in other non-native languages acquisition began. Prior to that, efforts had been focused on listening in the first language and reading in both languages, but not on listening in second language [12].

The contribution and impact of this research is mainly associated with the fact that it is developed for the first time in Albanian secondary schools and as such, it makes up for a specific novelty in this field. All the results derived from this study, will be part of the publication of the corresponding doctoral study which will serve to have a clear framework of the context so that the later it is better understood and how the relevant challenges should be handled. With regards to the results of this research, they have been developed through: round tables, seminars, workshops, conferences as well as through the publication of various articles [13], [14].

2. METHOD

The research was drafted at the Department of Italian Language, FoFL/UniTir (Albania), and implemented during the 2022-2023 academic year. The team consisted of five lecturers, 30 second year students of the Master in Teaching, who attended the mandatory professional practice subject, in the target schools of this research work, as well as a Ph.D. student (one of the abovementioned authors). The research was conducted in 16 general high schools in various districts of Albania covering all regional areas: 24 schools and 23 teachers of Italian language of whom 21 filled in the questionnaires; 6,000 students of secondary and upper secondary education of whom 4,301 filled in the questionnaires. The administration of the questionnaires was physically handled in all classes from the team members. The detected results were collected by CleanScore (IT support) which in their collection used the Remarc Software system. The research work was performed in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration.

2.1. Reliability and sample size

The work was based on a cross-sectional research design, which is used for studies conducted in the field of foreign language teaching/learning as it is economical in gathering data in a shorter time frame, suitable for data collection from students (in our case, from different classes) at a specific moment in time [15]. It has been viewed as a "snapshot" of a group of individuals [16]. Furthermore, the quantitative study was based on primary data that used a survey methodology for data collection. The questionnaire was specifically prepared for this study. The reliability of the 30 items for the student's questionnaire and 21 item for the teacher's questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha [17]. This measure indicated whether responses were consistent between items (reliability), Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0 to 1. Higher values indicated stronger relationships between the items and a value of Cronbach's alpha of .7 or higher was usually considered to be good. In our case the value of Cronbach's alpha for the student's questionnaire was 0.7821020 and for the teacher's was 0.778132, that was a reasonable value which indicated a good internal consistency of the items of the questionnaires.

The sample size is related to the students as for the teachers, there was a specific number, thus 23 participants, of whom 21 filled in the questionnaire. The sample size was defined through the Cochran's modified formula (1) for finite populations [18], where: e was the desired level of precision, margin of error, in our case=5%; p was the (estimated) proportion of the population which has the attribute in question, in our case=0.5; N was the size of population, in our case=6000; Z -score. To calculate the sample size, we used the confidence level 95% for which the z-score was 1.96. Making all the replacements, for our formula we could have had a minimum sample size of 361. The actual sample size we used was 4301, as it was much more suitable for our analysis.

$$n = \frac{z^2 * p(1-p)/e^2}{1 + (\frac{z^2 * p(1-p)}{e^2 N})} \quad (1)$$

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is impossible in this article to reflect all the extracted results as they are numerous, which is why we shall focus on the most significant ones, as related to the scope of the work. In this first part we will refer to the data related to the questionnaires addressed to the students. According to the results obtained the female percentage of 54.68% is higher than the male 40.99% ($M=1.43$, $SD=0.49$). The fact remains that for the total population in Albania, aged 0-39 years old, there are 51 more males than females, with a ratio of 1.067. This indicates that females are much more likely to pursue studies compared to males.

Regarding the second question of which foreign languages the students prefer, the results shows that 58.61% prefer the English language, which was predictable. The English language is followed by the Italian language with 24.02%, 6.60% for the German language, and 6.39% for other languages supplemented individually by students ($M=1.55$, $SD=0.77$). As expected, the English language is the most preferred of all languages, especially due to its practical use and not only, which overshadows the use of smaller languages.

There is a noticeable decrease in the percentage of preference for the Italian language, especially in the last 20 years. This fact shows that this language, despite the employment opportunities offered in Albania, is less preferred due to the fact of continuous emigration to English-speaking countries. The most important reason is the motivation to learn a foreign language that offers more opportunities in the future such as English [19].

In Figure 1, regarding language skills as ordered in the following question: in which one of these do you encounter most difficulty? (A) listening; (B) reading; (C) speaking; (D) writing, indicate that the greatest difficulties are related to the ability to write in Italian (34.25%), next speak (28.81%), then listening skills (24%), while reading (16.60%) ranks as the least difficult ($M=1.37$, $SD=0.46$). Various questions arise with regard to this result. So, what kind of listening event do students talk about where they feel they have easy understanding? How much do they understand from what they hear?

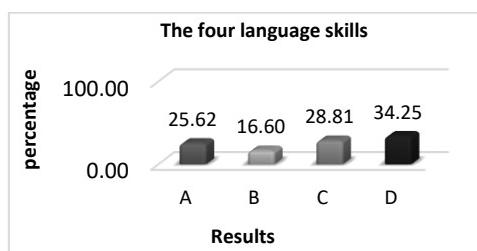


Figure 1. Difficulties encountered in general

The most likely answer to why our students do not have much difficulty with listening can be connected to the fact that the Albanians in general are to some extent familiar with the sound of Italian. This is because many Italians work and live in Albania, Italian TV channels are easy to be tuned to, elements of Italian culture like fashion, food, and others are widespread in Albania, there are many Albanian immigrants in Italy and many Albanian students at Italian continue their universities. Thus, what we can draw from this result is that it is necessary to identify to what degree of a communicative event that takes into account the age and level of the pupils, a complete comprehension of the auditory material is possible.

Moreover, the next follow-up question, it presents a result that somehow overturns the reasoning, as it now concerns well-prepared listening materials for language instruction. Do you have difficulty understanding authentic audio materials? Yes (Y)/No (N). The 49.83% ($M=1.53$, $SD=0.50$), result means that difficulties do exist. The 44.73% of result means not. The percentages differ slightly from each other. This fact shows that a little more than half of the students have difficulties in listening materials. These materials, we know are materials specifically developed for the development of this ability and that their listening ability differs essentially from their listening to the teacher or classmates in a conversation about the very same aspects that that type of material includes: rhythm, tone, speed, background noises, of native interlocutors communicating freely as in normal life. Thus, challenges of this nature such as the speed of communication in listening are also confirmed in previous studies [20] pointing out that speed, and the length among others [21], is one of the main issues in listening comprehension.

Following the question on what their most difficulties are and where on Figure 2: (A) the distinction of sounds; (B) the distinction of words from one another; (C) the meaning of the word; (D) the meaning of the sentences; (E) the distinction of context; (F) proverbs; (G) words with connotations; and (H) speech containing metaphors. Based on the results, the greatest difficulties are encountered in understanding words,

following 19.62% with the meaning of sentences, 16.16% in the differentiation of words from one another. We also noticed that that students have less difficulty in the distinction of sounds 11.30%.

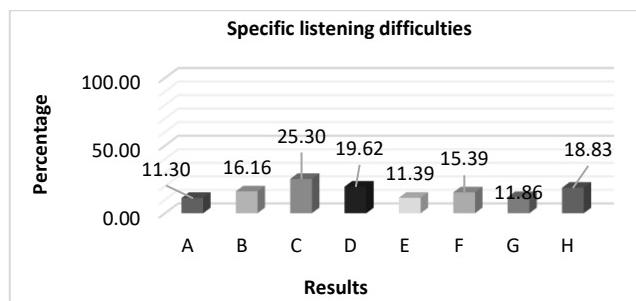


Figure 2. Difficulties related to particular aspect of listening

In comparison with a previous study, one of the highlighted issues is phonological decoding, namely the differentiation of phonemes as a fundamental cause of all misunderstandings that arise at the syntactic level [22], which is not confirmed in this case, for several reasons. The first one is because the Albanian language has 36 phonemes, so the auditory and phonological apparatus is prepared to distinguish and pronounce the phonemes of different languages, and in the case of the Italian language with 26 phonemes, we have phonetic superiority. The second one because Albanians, due to geographical, historical, and cultural proximity, as well as political, economic, and tourist relations, with Italy, have practiced listening to and distinguishing the phonemes of the Italian language.

However, as referred to in Figure 3, this means that there is a lack of understanding as well as lack of possession of a lexical basis in Italian, i.e. of understanding texts, which need to be recovered at grade level in such a way as to enable students to understand the audio materials [23]. Alongside, authentic listening materials, it is necessary to apply different strategies and techniques such as activities before, during and after listening, of the active, interactive, discriminate, intensive and extensive listening type [24], [25]. An important role in the proper development of these activities is certainly played by the teacher [26], who must explicate in advance the purpose of these activities. In addition, the teacher shall has enabled the students to develop techniques that help them in an efficient perception of language sounds, words and the meaning of sentences. This is facilitated, among others, through two essential strategies such as top-down and bottom-up [27] and the application of metacognitive strategies, which include the ability to consciously use metacognitive knowledge to plan, organize, use and evaluate learning [28] and cognitive ones that serve for long-term and social affective memorization related to cooperation and interaction with others [29].

The data in Figure 3 present us with an even clearer picture of where the students' problems stem from. With regards to the question: what do you usually listen to in a foreign language class? (A) the teacher; (B) Audio of reading text; (C) YouTube text listening (songs, interviews, fairy tales, stories); (D) Audio accompanying videos we see in the classroom (films, documentaries, interviews, curiosities); (E) Other (specify). It turns out that for most of the time, 72.70% the class listens to the teacher. This is a problem that speaks volumes and tells us that the teacher takes little or no consideration of the use of authentic audio materials, limiting him/herself to the use of their voice, which is already known with certainty that cannot meet the listening needs of the student regarding the development of this foreign language proficiency.

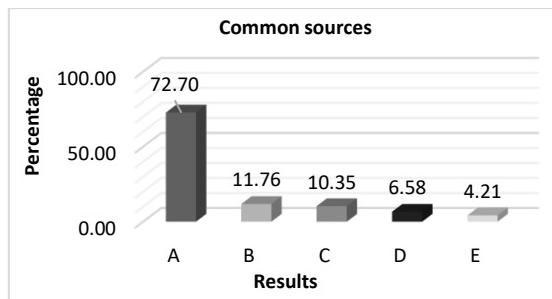


Figure 3. Resources of listening in class

This is confirmed by the fact that even though listening activities have increased compared to the past, activities aimed at developing listening skills are rarely suggested, despite the significant importance they actually have in language learning [30]. The teacher must carefully and efficiently use authentic materials such as videos, by building specific activities to bring a significant improvement in the development of listening skills, taking into account the interest, the level, the aimed objectives [31]. This aspect of teaching, i.e. the teacher doing most of the speaking in class when this should be left to the students, has already been verified since 1963 by Gattegno [32], which was the impetus that enabled him to conceive the Silent Way method [33]; therefore, this situation must undoubtedly change, and it is up to teachers to reduce their speaking time and provide their students with authentic and variegated listening materials to help improve this skill. In a previous study regarding the usage of listening skills, the same situation is observed for some types of listening materials that are used very little or not at all in foreign language classroom [34]. Their importance and diversity are a key and significant factor for the development of listening skills, which is confirmed in numerous studies [35].

The fact that this is required by the students too confirms the above in the following Figure 4. With regards to the question: do you think more and more diverse materials should be offered regarding the development of hearing ability? We find that the 72.59% of the responders are looking for the addition and provision of the most diverse materials related to the development of this capability ($M=1.64$, $SD=0.35$).

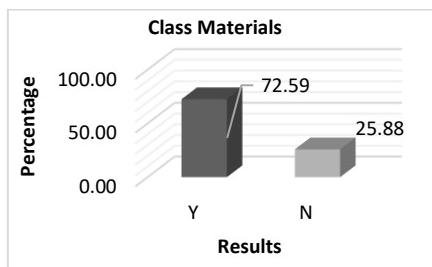


Figure 4. Various didactic materials

The need to add activities and materials is reaffirmed again in the next question, which indicates that classroom activities are not sufficient for the development of this skill. The question: do you think your classroom listening activities are sufficient to deal with "real" situations in real life? The result shows that 53.15% request the addition of materials, while 45.64% do not.

The percentage 53.15 of students who think that more listening materials should be included is an indication that clearly speaks of the necessity of this need in foreign language classes. However, it should be clear that teachers operating in remote districts or rural areas do not have all the technological possibilities to enable the provision of a variety of materials, so they are often assigned as homework in order for students to use personal resources in this regard, which of course is not always properly realized or not at all. It is very important that the student has continuous exposure to listening in order to reinforce existing knowledge and understand new inputs, considered extensive listening. Extensive listening refers to all types of listening activities that allow students to receive a lot of understandable and enjoyable listening input. Extensive listening is an approach that enables the student to address the issues he/she has with 'meaning' and create connections between words [36].

In the last section regarding the personal opinion of the students on certain aspects we have presented the most important ones that referred to the object of study, as in Figure 5. The data are related to the question: listening to Italian language is a tough test for me: 1=Disagree, 2=Very little, 3=Little, 4=Sufficient to some extent, 5=Agree but not 100%, 6=Totally agree. So, we have 12.58% who do not agree, 12.79% which are very little agree, 21.97% which are a little agree, 17.83% which are quite agreeable to some extent, 18.21% which are agree but not 100% and 14.88% which are totally agree.

We see that the results are distributed more or less in the same percentage. To be understated that percentages from no. 4-6 are increasing, so in this regard we must reflect on the fact that the majority of them face difficulties despite being different percentages and on different scales of evaluation. This means that it is necessary to consider the appropriate interventions during the teaching process.

However, listening is considered a challenging skill to develop, thus it is necessary to conduct a thorough analysis of the specific students' needs in this area. Several conducted studies confirm that it is necessary for the teacher to understand what are the difficulties that the student faces in order to use such activities to enable them to overcome and develop this ability [37].

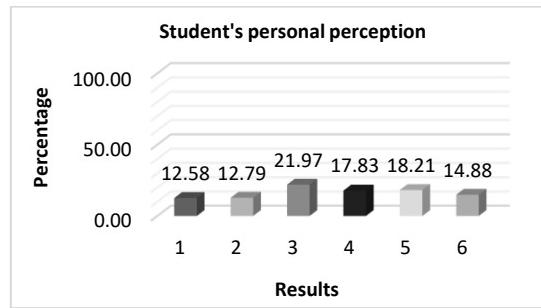


Figure 5. Student's difficulties in listening FL

Regarding the individual strategies or individual techniques that students use to understand listening texts, such as their general non-detailed meaning, finding similarities with previous texts, or understanding based on what they know, they use to understand audio material similarly as in Figures 6-8 regarding the relevant questions. From the obtained results we note that in terms of a portion of the techniques they use individually the values are in positive percentages up from 3-6. This suggest that these kinds of strategies or techniques of comprehension help them in grasping audio materials despite their number being small respectively compared to the total; yet these results enable us to understand what individual techniques or strategies we need to develop in order to increase the understanding capacity for listening materials. Regarding these strategies and the influencing factors that affect the development of this skill and how they should be implemented to achieve the objectives, it is required that the teacher perceives their cognitive style in order to know what interventions need to take place and how.

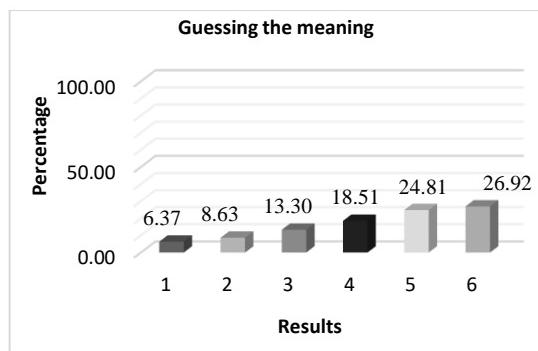


Figure 6. I try to understand the text in its entirety, not in detail, using the words I know to roughly guess the meaning of words I don't know

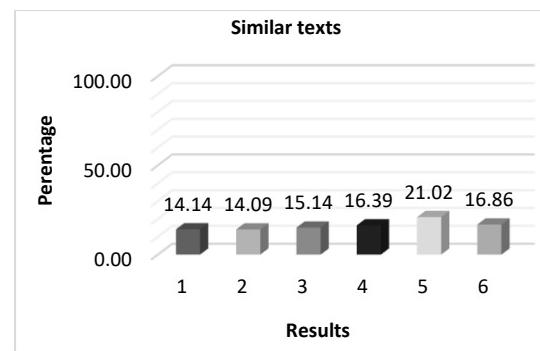


Figure 7. Before I listen to a text, I think of similar texts I've encountered before

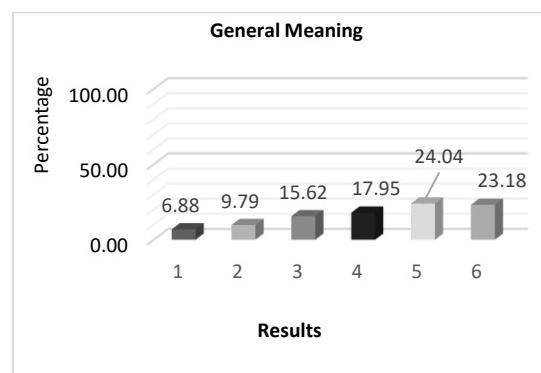


Figure 8. I am helped by the general meaning of the text, to induce the meaning of words I do not understand

3.1. Questionnaires addressed to teachers

In the questionnaires for teachers, with regards to the following question: do you think that all four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, should be dealt with equally? We noticed that 68.18% of the responses correctly state they have the same weight in their teaching process. However, the 18.18% who think they are not equally important is a worrying figure, and another 9.09% think that other skills should be developed ($M=1.38$, $SD=0.67$).

In the answers provided it also turns out that grammar is what is worth much more than anything else. Bearing in mind that the years of the participants' work experience is from 10 to 15, this means that these are the teachers who graduated almost 15 to 20 years ago, and given that the prevailing teaching model of the time was largely the traditional classic. This explains to some extent the fact that a small part thinks that grammar is the main aspect that a teacher should worry about.

Regarding the results appearing in Figure 9 referred to the following question: how much do you appreciate the students' listening and speaking abilities while teaching Italian? (A) very; (B) little; (C) enough; and (D) equal to all other skills. The result indicates that the 50% appreciate it a lot, the 0% little, the 18.18% enough and the 27.27% equal to the other skills ($M=2.24$, $SD=1.37$).

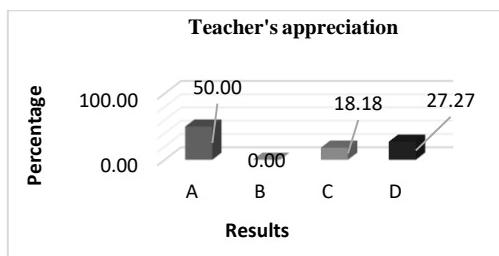


Figure 9. Teacher's evaluation on students' skills

The result that 50% of them appreciate it a lot, contradicts what the students state when they say that teachers are the ones who are heard in the classroom far more than other listening materials. Of course, teachers cannot openly admit to how much and how they use listening materials. This is why we will consider as more realistic and more accurate results the data derived from the questionnaires of the students in the first place because they are in a larger number for one thing, and, for another, the teachers tend to complement the situation and present their controversial work methodologically.

In the following question: do you think Italian pre-college and college teachers need special training for using such authentic materials, the results indicates that the 54.55% of the teachers answered no, and 45.45% answered yes ($M=1.45$, $SD=0.51$). What does it mean this? Is surprising that over half of them think they don't need to be trained on the use of authentic materials for the enhancement of listening skills. The only explanation we can offer is that either they are fully trained and formed on this aspect or they do not consider the fact that a teacher needs continuous training as teaching is a constantly evolving process, and the arrival of new materials gives rise to the need for proper and accurate use of them in order to ensure the achievement of the objectives, as well as the fact that language itself is an evolving organism. The fact that students present issues clearly indicate what they use in the classroom and the extent of the techniques and strategies usage, which are in turn not at a suitable level.

In terms of a reflection on the objectives achieved by the students themselves and how they self-assess their achievements: Do you use self-assessment forms for your students with regard to the implementation of a particular activity in the classroom? It turns out that 36.36% ($M=1.53$, $SD=0.51$) of the teachers do not use them and the other 40.91% use them.

What is revealed in this case is the ignore on the part of the teacher to understand what the student has benefited from a certain activity or a full didactic unit, which penalizes the student who has encountered difficulties. Their limited use goes against the fact that the student is not clear about the respective competencies. When the student understands that self-assessment is beneficial, especially regarding learning, he/she fully appreciates it and wishes to carry out self-evaluation [38]. Students will focus on their language needs and receive useful feedback; self-assessment can have high results in terms of authenticity and washback.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the hypothesis on difficulties and/or problems related to listening skills are confirmed. The listening skills problems encountered are mostly related to comprehension, vocabulary, lack of listening activity or materials, limited use and variety of materials by teachers assuming that they are simply a waste of time, lack of technological means, or use of materials that do not motivate students. The conclusion of this study is that the listening ability is intertwined with understanding and the use of innumerable materials should be carefully selected along with the didactization according to the level and achievement objectives by the students. Another important step is the effective management of the classroom in order to avoid and overcome problems related to listening. It is of high importance providing listening opportunities and communication with native Italians and not just auditory materials. On the other hand, educational institutions should use their twining opportunities, in order to enable students visits in the countries of origin of foreign languages, and the possibility of foreign lecturers going hand in hand with the continuous training in workshops or teaching exchanges to upgrade the knowledges and skills with the latest glotodidactics for better performance and teaching qualities.

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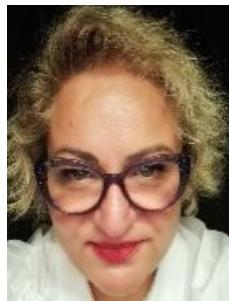
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